Afghanistan

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

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The constitution states that Islam is the "religion of the state" and that "no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam." In 2004 the constitution accorded both Shi'a and Sunni Islam equal recognition. The constitution proclaims that "followers of other religions are free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of law."

Respect for religious freedom deteriorated during the reporting period, particularly for Christian groups and individuals. Residual effects of years of jihad against the USSR, civil strife, Taliban rule, popular suspicion regarding outside influence and the motivations of foreigners, and still weak democratic institutions remained serious obstacles. There were cases of harassment, occasional violence, and inflammatory public statements made by members of parliament and television programming against religious minorities, particularly Christians, and Muslims who were perceived as not respecting Islamic strictures. Negative societal opinion and suspicion of Christian activities led to targeting of Christian groups and individuals, including Afghan converts to Christianity. The lack of government responsiveness and protection for these groups and individuals contributed to the deterioration of religious freedom.

In July 2009 President Karzai signed the Shi'a Personal Status Law (SPSL), a civil law governing family and marital issues for the Shi'a minority. The constitution recognizes the right of the Shi'a minority to adjudicate personal and family matters according to their own school of jurisprudence. The first version of the law attracted widespread criticism because of restrictions on the rights of women. The Ministry of Justice made some amendments to remove the most controversial phrases; President Karzai signed the amended version which was published in the official gazette. Many international partners

The country's population is almost entirely Muslim. Non-Muslim minority groups, particularly Christian, Hindu, and Sikh groups, were targets of discrimination and persecution. Conversion from Islam was understood by Shi'a and Sunni Islamic clergy, as well as many citizens, to contravene the tenets of Islam. Within the Muslim population, relations among the different sects continued to be difficult. Historically, the minority Shi'a community has faced discrimination from the majority Sunni population. This discrimination continued during the reporting period. Local Hindu and Sikh populations, although allowed to practice their religion publicly, continued to encounter problems obtaining land for cremation and historically have faced discrimination when seeking government jobs, as well as harassment during major celebrations. Most local Baha'is and Christians did not publicly state their beliefs or gather openly to worship.

The U.S. government regularly discusses religious freedom with government officials as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. embassy continued to send political, civil society, and religious leaders to programs in the United States. Some Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) provided community assistance through the U.S. military's Commanders Emergency Response Program (CERP) funds by repairing madrassahs (Islamic schools).

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 402,356 square miles; population estimates ranged from 24 to 33 million. Reliable data on religious demography is not available because an official nationwide census has not been conducted in decades. Observers estimated that 80 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, 19 percent Shi'a Muslim, and other religious groups comprise less than 1 percent of the population. According to self-estimates by these communities, there are approximately 3,000 Sikhs, more than 400 Baha'is, and 100 Hindu believers. There is a small Christian community; estimates on its size range from 500 to 8,000. In addition there are small numbers of adherents of other religious groups. There is one known Jewish Afghan.

Traditionally the dominant religion has been Islam, specifically the sect of Sunni Islam that follows the Hanafi School of jurisprudence. For the last 200 years, much of the population adhered to Deobandi-influenced Hanafi Sunnism. The Dar-ul-Ulum (Institute of Higher Religious Education) at Deoband is a prominent Asian center of Sunni religious education. Many Afghan Sunni religious scholars have either studied at Dar-ul-Ulum Deoband, or were trained by scholars who studied there. A sizable minority also adhered to orders of Islamic spirituality and mysticism, generally known as Sufism. Sufism is organized by orders or brotherhoods (both Sunni and Shi'a) that follow charismatic religious leaders. During the 20th century, influence of the "Wahhabi" form of Islam grew in certain regions.

Historically members of the same religious groups have concentrated in certain regions. Sunni Muslim Pashtuns dominate the south and east. The homeland of the Shi'a Hazaras is in the Hazarajat, the mountainous central highland provinces around Bamyan province. Northeastern provinces traditionally have Ismaili populations. Other areas, including Kabul, are more heterogeneous and include Sunni, Shi'a, Sikh, Hindu, and Baha'i populations. The northern city of Mazar-e Sharif includes a mix of Sunnis (including ethnic Pashtuns, Turkmen, Uzbeks, and Tajiks) and Shi'a (Hazaras and Qizilbash), including Shi'a Ismailis.

In the 20th century, small communities of Baha'is , Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, and Sikhs lived in the country, although most members of these communities emigrated during the years of civil war and Taliban rule. By the end of Taliban rule, non-Muslim populations had been virtually eliminated except for a small population of native Hindus and Sikhs. Since the fall of the Taliban, some members of religious minorities have returned, many settling in Kabul.

Nuristanis, a small but distinct ethnolinguistic group living in a mountainous eastern region, practiced an ancient polytheistic religion until they converted to Islam in the late 19th century. Some non-Muslim religious practices survive today as folk customs.

There are two active gurdwaras (Sikh places of worship) in Kabul and 10 in other parts of the country; there were 64 gurdwaras throughout the country before the war. There are four Hindu mandirs (temples) in three cities; two mandirs are located in Kabul, one of which shares a wall with a mosque; one is in Jalalabad, and one in Ghazni. Eighteen others were destroyed or rendered unusable due to looting during the Mujahideen civil war.

There is one synagogue, which is not in use for lack of a Jewish community. There is no longer a public Christian church; the courts have not upheld the church's claim to its 99-year lease, and the landowner destroyed the building in March

2010. Chapels and churches for the international community of various faiths are located on several military bases, PRTs, and at the Italian embassy. Some citizens who converted to Christianity as refugees have returned.

The Baha'i Faith has had followers in the country for approximately 150 years. The community is predominantly based in Kabul, where more than 300 Baha'i members live; another 100 are said to live in other parts of the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Full and effective enforcement of the 2004 constitution was a continued challenge due to its potentially contradictory commitments, and the lack of a tradition of judicial review.

The constitution includes a mandate to abide by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and obliges the state to "create a prosperous and progressive society based on social justice, protection of human dignity, protection of human rights, realization of democracy, and to ensure national unity and equality among all ethnic groups and tribes." Followers of other religions are "free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of the law."

The constitution requires that the president and vice president be Muslim and does not distinguish in this respect between Shi'a and Sunni. This requirement was not explicitly applied to government ministers or members of parliament, but each of their oaths includes swearing allegiance and obedience to the principles of Islam.

The constitution also declares that Islam is the official "religion of the state," that "no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam," and that "the provisions of adherence to the fundamentals of the sacred religion of Islam and the regime of the Islamic Republic cannot be amended." For situations on which the constitution and penal code are silent, including conversion and blasphemy, courts relied on their interpretation of Islamic law some interpretations of which conflict with the mandate to abide by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which the country has signed.

The constitution states that when there is no provision in the constitution or other laws that guide ruling on an issue, the courts' decisions shall accord with Hanafi jurisprudence in the way that would serve justice in the best possible manner. The constitution also grants that Shi'a law would be applied in cases dealing with personal matters where all parties are Shi'as. There was no separate law applying to non-Muslims.

In July 2009 the president signed a revised version of the SPSL. President Karzai signed the first version of law in April 2009. Some prominent Shi'as supported the law for officially recognizing Shi'a jurisprudence and some Shi'a groups hailed the law for officially recognizing the Shiite minority; however, the April law was controversial both domestically and internationally for its failure to protect women's rights, specifically to protect women from marital rape. Following a mid-2009 review of the law, the Ministry of Justice removed some of the controversial articles in the original version; President Karzai signed the amended version in July, which became public law. Many observers inside and outside the country continued to object to articles in the law that conflicted with women's constitutionally protected rights and international human rights treaties and conventions to which the country was a signatory. Articles in the law of particular concern included minimum age of marriage, polygamy, inheritance rights, right of self-determination, freedom of movement, sexual obligations, and guardianship.

Conversion from Islam is considered apostasy and is punishable by death under some interpretations of Islamic law in the country. The criminal code does not define apostasy as a crime, and the constitution forbids punishment for any crime not defined in the criminal code; however, the penal code states that egregious crimes, including apostasy, would be punished

in accordance with Hanafi religious jurisprudence and handled by an attorney general's office prosecutor. Converting from Islam to another religion was considered an egregious crime, and therefore, fell under Islamic law. Male citizens over age 18 or female citizens over age 16 of sound mind who converted from Islam had three days to recant their conversion or be subject to death by stoning, deprivation of all property and possessions, and the invalidation of their marriage. In recent years neither the national nor local authorities have imposed criminal penalties on converts from Islam.

Blasphemy is a capital crime under some interpretations of Islamic law in the country, and according to such interpretations, an Islamic judge could punish blasphemy with death, if committed by a male over age 18 or a female over age 16 of sound mind. Those accused of blasphemy are given three days to recant their actions or face death. In recent years this sentence has not been carried out.

The General Directorate of Decrees and Fatwas under the Supreme Court ruled in May 2007 that the Baha'i Faith is distinct from Islam and a form of blasphemy. It held that all Muslims who converted to the Baha'i Faith were apostates and all followers of the Baha'i Faith were infidels. Baha'is who accepted the Muslim declaration of faith were not expected to be subject to the ruling. The ruling created uncertainties for the country's small Baha'i population, particularly on the question of marriages between Baha'i women and Muslim men. Citizens who converted from Islam to the Baha'i faith faced risk of persecution, similar to that of Christian converts, up to and including the death penalty. Also unclear was how the government would treat second generation Baha'is who were born into families of Baha'i followers. Although they technically have not converted, some may still view them as having committed blasphemy. The ruling was not expected to affect foreign national Baha'is.

According to government officials, although the courts consider all citizens to be Muslims by default, in practice non-Muslims can be married as long as they do not publicly acknowledge their non-Muslim beliefs. In addition the judges stated that a Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman, but the woman must first convert if she was not "of the book," that is not Christian or Jewish. Moreover, a Muslim woman is not allowed to marry a non-Muslim man.

Only Islamic holy days are celebrated as public holidays. The Shi'a community openly celebrated the birthday of Imam Ali, one of the most revered figures in the Shi'a tradition. Observations of the Shi'a holiday of Ashura in January and December 2009 were widespread and peaceful throughout the north and central areas, as well as in Kandahar.

The government continued to update the existing criminal and civil legal codes to bring them in line with the country's international treaty obligations. The 1976 penal code addresses "Crimes against Religions," although it does not address blasphemous remarks. The penal code also says persons who forcibly stop the conduct of religious rituals of any religion and persons who destroy or damage permitted places of worship where religious rituals are conducted or who destroy or damage any sign or symbol of any religion shall be subject to a medium-term prison sentence (defined in the criminal code as confinement in a jail for not less than one, nor more than five years) and/or a cash fine of between $240 and $1200 USD (12,000 and 60,000 Afghanis). There is nothing in the penal code related to the spoken or written utterance of insults or profanity against God, religion, sacred symbols, or religious books.

The media law prohibits publicizing and promoting religions other than Islam. Many authorities and most of society viewed proselytizing as contrary to the beliefs of Islam. There were unconfirmed reports of harassment of Christians thought to be involved in proselytizing. Some Christians avoided situations in which they might be viewed as seeking to spread their religion to the larger community.

The constitution protects freedom of expression and of the press. The mass media law, which included negative articles with respect to the freedoms of religion and expression, was published in the official gazette in September 2009. In September 2008 parliament voted to override President Karzai's 2007 veto of the law.

Under Chapter 10 of the mass media law, "Works and Materials Prohibited to be Produced, Printed and Published/Broadcast," Article 45 prohibits, production, reproduction, print and publishing of the following materials: works and materials that are contrary to the principles of Islam; works and materials offensive to other religions and sects; works and materials humiliating or offensive to real or legal persons; works and materials considered libelous to real and legal persons and that may cause damage to their personality and credibility; works and materials which are contrary to the constitution and are considered a crime by the penal code; publicizing and dissemination (promotion) of religions other than Islam; disclosure of identity and pictures of victims of violence and rape in a manner that damages their social dignity; and articles and topics that harm the physical, spiritual, and moral well-being of persons, especially children and adolescents. Also under the media law, the proprietors of newspapers, printers, and electronic media companies must be licensed by and registered with the Ministry of Information and Culture.

The ambiguity surrounding what constitutes offensive material offered the potential for abuse to restrict press freedom and intimidate journalists. These rules also applied to non-Muslims and foreign-owned media outlets. The amended media law instructs National Radio and Television Afghanistan (RTA), the state run media outlet, to provide balanced broadcasting that reflects the culture, language, and religious beliefs of all ethnic groups in the country. According to the law, RTA was obligated to adjust its programs in light of Islamic principles and national and spiritual values.

The Ulema Council is a group of influential Sunni, Shi'a, and Sufi scholars, imams, and Muslim jurists from across the country reflecting the network of provincial ulema councils. Its senior members met regularly with the president and advised him on Islamic moral, ethical, and legal problems. The council was nominally independent of the government, but its members received financial support from the state. Through contacts with the presidential palace, the parliament, and ministries, the council or its members advised on the formulation of new legislation or the implementation of existing law. Although it was well represented in provincial capitals, the council had much less outreach in villages and rural areas.

In 2007 the Ulema Council called for limits to freedom of expression and press. The Council urged individuals to avoid conduct that may be perceived as insulting to local traditions and religious values on the grounds that "safeguarding our national honors and Islamic values is the obligation of every citizen." This declaration mirrors article 1 of the constitution, enforced in high-profile cases such as the 2007 case of Parvez Kambakhsh, sentenced to 20 years imprisonment for distributing material from the internet questioning the condition of women in Islam. President Karzai pardoned Kambakhsh in August 2009. Many citizens, including the upper house of the parliament, condemned the pardon, which the international community strongly supported.

The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) monitors high profile religious freedom cases and receives and investigates complaints from the public. During the reporting period, all provincial police departments instructed human rights officers to investigate abuses, although many, like most other institutions, lacked adequate personnel and other resources.

The Ministry of Hajj and Islamic Affairs is the primary ministry handling religious affairs. The ministry's responsibilities include sending citizens on the Hajj pilgrimage, collecting endowment-related revenues, identifying and acquiring endowment-related property, providing religious teaching to children, issuing fatwas, testing imams, and raising public awareness of religious problems.

Both Sunnis and Shi'as were permitted to go on the Hajj, and the government imposed no quota for either group. Approximately 30,000 citizens made the Hajj in 2009. Participants were selected by lottery.

The licensing and registration of religious groups is not required, although the government registers mullahs (religious leaders). Mullahs working for the Ministry of Hajj and Islamic Affairs are generally proposed for registration by local

residents and approved by the ministry. There are an estimated 160,000 mullahs working in the country. Of those, 3,500 are registered with and receive salaries from the ministry. There are an estimated 1,380 mullahs working in Kabul, of whom approximately 620 receive salaries from the ministry (and are counted as part of the 3,500 national figure). Many mullahs are not registered due to lack of capacity and funding to support more mullahs at mosques, as well as security problems in the provinces. New mosques are either opened or built based on the government's development plans or based on proposals by local residents, which must be subsequently approved by the Ministry of Hajj and Islamic Affairs.

The Ministry of Education considered it the government's responsibility to offer tolerant and modern Islamic education for youth. Since 2007 the government has run its own madrassahs to reduce the number of children studying at extremist madrassahs abroad and to counter the influence of extremist elements operating in the countryside, including those through independent madrassahs. These schools planned to offer an alternative to the Taliban's use of education as a weapon of terrorism, but lack of funding has hindered these plans. There were 48 Ministry of Education-sponsored madrassas throughout the country, including several in Kabul, Mazar-e Sharif, Nangarhar, and Herat provinces by the end of the reporting period. The government established 14 high madrassas in 2007 and eight in 2008, with the intention to open a new high madrassah in each of the country's 34 provinces as well as in each of the country's 364 districts. Insecurity has slowed progress in opening additional schools. The planned schools would accommodate up to 50,000 children and offer a curriculum consisting of 40 percent religious education, 40 percent general education, and 20 percent computer science and foreign languages.

The Ministry of Education required that independent madrassahs be accredited and disclose their funding sources. In 2009 240 independent madrassahs opened throughout the country. Madrassahs must route funding from private or international donations through the ministry, or they are banned. This system allowed the government to monitor assistance to institutes of learning funded by its known allies. According to the Ministry of Education, the government solicited donations for the support of madrassahs of all levels from Muslim countries and private individuals, including a request that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia support a madrassah.

The components of the educational system that survived more than 30 years of war placed considerable emphasis on religion. The constitution states, "The state shall devise and implement a unified educational curriculum based on the provisions of the sacred religion of Islam, national culture, and in accordance with academic principles, and develop the curriculum of religious subjects on the basis of the Islamic sects existing in Afghanistan." The public school curriculum included Islamic content but no content from other religious groups.

There was no restriction on parental religious teaching, and non-Muslims were not required to study Islam. The national curriculum and textbooks that emphasized moderate Islamic terms and principles steadily replaced the preaching of jihad in schools.

The post-Taliban government has not banned any political parties for religious reasons. The constitution allows for political parties provided that "the program and charter of the party are not contrary to the principles of the sacred religion of Islam."

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government enforced existing legal restrictions on religious freedom selectively and in a discriminatory manner. In May 2010 a television journalist produced a program accusing Christian NGOs of proselytizing, relying on two-year-old footage depicting a group of Christian converts being baptized. In response the Minister of Economy, which regulates NGOs, temporarily banned two Christian-affiliated NGOs accused by the journalist of proselytizing. Although no evidence was found linking the groups to proselytizing activities, most of their activities remained suspended at the end of the

reporting period. Also, the president ordered the Ministry of Interior, the National Directorate of Security (NDS), and the Attorney General's office to investigate proselytizing activities by NGOs.

There was no information available concerning restrictions on the general training of clergy. The government paid small stipends to officially registered mullahs, but only a small number of active mullahs were registered, because the government's registration program operated on a limited budget and with a limited staff.

There were no explicit restrictions for religious minority groups to establish places of worship and training of clergy to serve their communities believers; however, very few public places of worship exist for minorities.

The right to change one's religion was not respected either in law or in practice. Muslims who converted to Christianity risked losing their marriage, rejection from their family and village, and loss of jobs. Following the May 2010 suspension of two NGOs on suspicion of proselytizing, some parliamentarians advocated violent responses toward the alleged apostates, including public execution.

There were an unknown number of foreign missionaries in the country who worked discreetly to avoid harassment. During the reporting period, there were a few reported incidents involving individuals attempting to proselytize, although no prosecutions arose from those incidents. In March 2010 an U.S. and a Dutch citizen were detained by the NDS on suspicion of proselytizing but released after several days of questioning. Some NGOs reported continued surveillance by NDS, including house searches for published religious materials or other evidence of proselytizing. Some international NGOs associated with religious organizations reported delayed visas for their employees.

After May 2010 demonstrations at Kabul University against foreign NGOs allegedly proselytizing in the country, Presidential Spokesman Waheed Omar stated that the president took a personal interest in the case of the NGOs and assigned the NDS and Ministry of Interior to investigate. Omar emphasized that the government would fight aggressively against proselytizing.

Approximately 90 percent of the country's inhabitants reported some access to radio. Most broadcast outlets have at least an hour of religious programming daily, including Qur'an readings, interviews with religious leaders, and recorded messages from religious leaders or scholars.

As in previous years, Hindus and Sikhs complained of not being able to cremate the remains of their dead in accordance with their customs, due to interference by those who lived near the cremation sites. The government did not protect Hindus' and Sikhs' right to carry out cremations. The community repeatedly petitioned the government for land on which to carry out cremations. Baha'is also could not bury their dead in accordance with their customs, but they lodged no formal complaints as they sought to avoid government attention. Although community representatives expressed concerns over land disputes, they often chose not to pursue restitution through the courts for fear of retaliation, particularly when powerful local leaders occupied their property. There were no known reports of active discrimination against Hindus by the government.

The government provided free electricity to mosques. The Hindu and Sikh communities lobbied the government to provide free electricity to their gurdwaras and mandirs; however, the government had not addressed these concerns as of the end of the reporting period. Further, gurdwaras and mandirs were charged as business entities, paying at a higher rate.

There are no legal restrictions on the import of religious texts.

The government does not designate religion on national identity cards and does not require individuals to declare belief in Islam to receive citizenship; however, the state, including the courts, traditionally considered all citizens to be Muslim. Therefore, some basic citizenship rights of non-Muslims were not explicitly codified.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Officials took actions that violated the religious freedom of some individuals or groups.

Two citizens were arrested June 3, 2010 on charges of converting from Islam after a television station aired footage of conversion baptisms. At the end of the reporting period, the men remained detained by the NDS.

On March 20, 2010, President Karzai pardoned Ghaus Zalmai and Mullah Qari Mushtq, who had been sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment for publishing a Dari-language translation of the Qur'an without the accompanying Arabic verses for comparison. Members of the Ulema Council and Parliament were among those who lobbied the president for the pardon. This action was a shift from previous reporting periods during which religious scholars alleged in court that the translation was un-Islamic for misinterpreting verses about alcohol, begging, homosexuality, and adultery. Zalmai and Mushtq's pardon overturned decisions by the Supreme Court in August 2009, an appeals court in February 2009, and a primary court in September 2008. There were no public protests following the pardon, although in 2007 protests calling for Zalmai's and Mushtq's punishment were held in various towns.

In August 2009 President Karzai, under pressure from national and international actors, pardoned Sayed Perwiz Kambakhsh. In 2007 police had arrested Kambakhsh, a student at Balkh University and a journalist for *Jahan-e Naw* (New World) daily, after he allegedly downloaded and distributed information from the Internet regarding the role of women in Islamic societies. In 2008 a local court sentenced him to death for "insolence to the Holy Prophet," basing its decision on Shari'a law. Kambakhsh immediately appealed the decision, and the attorney general's office moved the case to the Kabul Appeals Court. After several days of hearings, in October 2008 a Kabul appeals court in a closed proceeding commuted the death sentence to a 20-year prison sentence without notifying Kambaksh's defense attorney. Many citizens, including members of the Upper House of Parliament, condemned Kambakhsh's pardon. Kambakhsh fled the country before news of his pardon reached the national media.

In 2007 the General Directorate of Fatwas and Accounts under the Supreme Court issued a ruling on the status of the Baha'i Faith, declaring it distinct from Islam and a form of blasphemy. There have been no cases cited under this ruling since its issuance.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

There were reported abuses targeted at specific religious groups by terrorist organizations, including al-Qa'ida and Taliban networks, during the reporting period. As in previous years, killings of religious leaders and attacks on mosques were attributed to al-Qa'ida and Taliban members. Sources reported that antigovernment elements continued to target religious leaders based on their links to the government or their particular interpretations of Islam.

According to the Ulema Council, insurgents killed at least 39 mullahs since 2002. There were no updates on the 2008 Taliban killing of a religious leader in Farah province after he led prayers condemning suicide attacks.

Political motivations appeared to be the primary impetus behind insurgent attacks on schools. In July 2009 in Logar province, a Taliban bomb near a school killed 25 persons, including 12 students. In August 2009 AIHRC stated that two schools in the Shindand district in Herat province used for voter registration and polling purposes were burned. In December 2009 the Taliban attacked the town of Langar, Badghis province, burning the girls' school, looting the health clinic, and killing three police officers. According to the director of education in Herat province, in May 2010 female

teachers and students in Guzara, Shindand, Koshke Rabat Sangi, and Kohna districts, were threatened to not attend schools. On May 28, 2010, Taliban destroyed one school and threatened two others in the Lakan area of Khost; the attackers demanded that certain detainees be released before they would allow the schools to reopen. Insurgents attacked and nearly destroyed the Zaku Khel School, a large project under construction by CARE International. Insurgents left letters at two other schools in Khost, warning students not to attend and turned students away on May 29.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The government continued to emphasize ethnic and intrafaith reconciliation indirectly through support to the judicial, constitutional, and human rights commissions composed of members of different ethnic and Islamic religious (Sunni and Shi'a) groups. The Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Ministry of Hajj and Islamic Affairs worked together to give women the opportunity to attend mosques.

In Kabul foreign residents met regularly at Christian worship services in private locations. Buddhist foreigners were free to worship in Hindu temples.

The government provided limited funding or assistance for Sikh schools. In 2007 the Ministry of Education opened a school for Sikh and Hindu children in Ghazni province. In March 2010 the government provided two teachers to the Sikh school in Kabul, teaching Dari and Pashto, but the government had no plans to offer more teaching in other subjects. Some Sikh children lived too far from Sikh schools to attend.

Members of the Hindu and Sikh communities reported that they no longer applied for government jobs because of past discrimination. One Sikh continued to serve as a member of the Upper House of Parliament. The Hindu and Sikh communities have lobbied to have one seat each designated for a Hindu and a Sikh representative in parliament. They pointed out that 10 seats are reserved for the ethnic minority Kuchi community and that their communities should also have reserved representation.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Relations between the different branches of Islam remained somewhat strained. Historically, the minority Shi'a faced discrimination from the Sunni population. Since Shi'a representation has increased in government, overt discrimination by Sunnis against the Shi'a community decreased. Sunni resentment over growing Shi'a influence was expressed widely and often linked to claims of Iranian efforts to influence local culture and politics.

Most Shi'a were members of the Hazara ethnic group, which was traditionally segregated from the rest of society for a combination of political, ethnic, and religious factors, some of which resulted in conflicts. The Hazaras accused the government of providing preferential treatment to Pashtuns and of ignoring minorities, especially Hazaras. The government made significant efforts to address historical tensions affecting the Hazara community. Although there were reported incidents of unofficial discrimination, and treatment varied by locality, Shi'a generally were free to participate fully in public life.

Three Ismailis serve as members of parliament; members of the Ismaili community complained of being marginalized from positions of political authority.

Non-Muslim minorities such as Sikhs, Hindus, and Christians continued to face social discrimination and harassment and, in some cases, violence. This treatment was not systematic, but the government did nothing to improve conditions during the reporting period. Public opinion was openly hostile toward Afghan converts to Christianity, including proselytizing by Christian organizations and individuals. Public protests occurred in several provinces after inflammatory public statements made by members of parliament and television programming; one protest burned an effigy of Pope Benedict XVI; one

protest demanded the closing of all churches (although none exist). More than 1,000 people marched in Mazar-e Sharif, demanding organizations that proselytized in Afghanistan be banned. One Christian-affiliated NGO lost its office space when neighbors requested that its landlord evict them.

The Hindu population, which is less distinguishable than the Sikh population (whose men wear a distinctive headdress), faced less harassment, although both groups reported being harassed by neighbors in their communities. The Sikh and Hindu communities, although allowed to practice their religion publicly, reportedly continued to face discrimination, including intimidation, causing 30 families to leave the country during the reporting period. Although Hindus and Sikhs had recourse to dispute resolution mechanisms such as the Special Land and Property Court, in practice the communities felt unprotected.

Many in the Sikh and Hindu communities did not send their children to public school because of reported abuse and harassment by other students. In previous years Hindus and Sikhs sent their children to private Hindus and Sikhs schools, but those schools have closed since the community's deteriorating economic circumstances have made private schooling unaffordable for most families. There is one school for Sikh children in Ghazni; one in Helmand; and, since March 2010 one in Kabul that only teaches Dari and Pashto. The Sikh community requested a school in Nangarhar; the government provided one during the reporting period. A few Sikh children attended private international schools. There were no Christian schools in the country. No Hindu children attended school in Kabul during the reporting period. The government took limited steps to protect and reintegrate these children into the classroom environment.

Local religious officials continued to confront women over their attire and behavior. In rural areas many women wore a burqa (religious dress that covers the full body and face, including the eyes) in public. Since the fall of the Taliban, many women in urban areas no longer wore the burqa, but almost all wore some form of head covering either by personal choice or due to community pressure.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with government officials as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

U.S. representatives met regularly with government officials and with religious and minority figures in a continued dialogue regarding the political, legal, religious, and human rights context of the country's reconstruction. The U.S. government worked with civil society organizations to promote religious tolerance.

The U.S. embassy actively promoted professional and cultural ties between local citizens and the United States. The public affairs section coordinated a variety of exchange, speaker, artistic, and information programs to generate an exchange of ideas between Americans and local citizens on democracy and civil society, human rights, Islam in America, and other subjects. The United States funded travel by local journalists, academics, politicians, government officials, religious scholars, community leaders, women, youth, and NGO officials to engage with their U.S. counterparts.

In October 2009 the embassy sponsored the visit of three Afghan mullahs and several religious scholars to the United States on an International Visitor Leadership Program entitled “Religion in America.” The embassy selected several religious leaders to participate in the Fiscal Year 2010 (FY10) and FY11 International Visitor Leadership Programs.

Through the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation, the embassy supported the restoration of religious sites, including the ruins of the 9th century mosque at the Noh Gonbad archaeological site. One of the oldest buildings in the Islamic world and an impressive example of Abbasid architecture, Noh Gonbad was undergoing major structural repairs at the end of the reporting period. Some PRTs provided assistance through the U.S. military's CERP funds to assist local communities repair madrassahs. During the reporting period, the U.S. military assisted in repairing, refurbishing, or

providing supplies, equipment, and facilities upgrades to six madrassahs and an unspecified number of mosques, including the Blue Mosque in Mazar-e Sharif. Public affairs also funded a grant to refurbish the historic Uleya Madrassah in Kabul.

The U.S. government worked with civil society organizations to promote religious tolerance. During the reporting period, the U.S. government provided funding for radio programming and training of religious, elected, and community leaders on the theme of “Human Rights and Women's Rights in the Context of Islam," developed and implemented by the NGO Equal Access. More than 200 religious and community leaders were trained during the reporting period. The U.S. government also provided funding for 14 public forums with 600 participants and six mobile theater performances which reached over 2,000 audience members.

Under the United States Agency for International Development supported Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society, Counterpart Afghanistan undertook a project to engage Muslim religious leaders who were instrumental in the formation of public opinion throughout the organization. Counterpart Afghanistan organized eight roundtables with Ulema (four in Kabul, two in Herat and one each in Balkh and Nangarhar Provinces) in which 66 persons participated including 58 Ulema, nine of whom were females, and eight civil society representatives. The purpose of these roundtables was to initiate dialogue with the Ulema on their perceptions of civil society and the concept of democracy from an Islamic point of view, to seek their opinions on the misperceptions and skepticism held by the general public regarding civil society, and to solicit recommendations on eliminating negative views. A report on "How Ulema View Afghan Civil Society" was published in 2010.

Back to Top